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HOMECOMING

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Luke 15:1-7, 11-20

". . . while he was still far off, his father saw him. . . and ran and put his arms around him. . ."
Luke 15:20 (NRSV)

"Only a mother could love this boy," I used to hear my mother-in-law observe whenever a youngster — mine or someone else's — was particularly unattractive, obnoxious or covered from head to toe with mud, grease, or whatever. "Only your mother could love you now, child." And it has the ring of basic truth to it. There are times and situations and messes in which we get ourselves where only the most extraordinary love can find us.

Some experts in human development are saying that human infants need the particular kind of love both a father and a mother offer, or a viable substitute. Not everyone agrees of course, but these experts are saying that often. "A mother's love is unconditional, a father's is more qualified; mothers worry about survival, father about success." The Director of the Family Research Council, William Maddox, quips, "Go to a park and watch a father and mother next to a child on a jungle gym. The father encourages the kid to climb to the top. The mother tells him to be careful." The child needs both. [*Time Magazine,* "Bringing Up Father," 6/23/93]

Now before I get myself into a whole lot of trouble let me say I know and admire mothers who are performance oriented, demanding, and fathers who are patient and more concerned about the child's well-being. I know men whose love for their child is unconditional and women who are not so unconditional. I know single mothers who do it all — alone — with strength and grace.

But just for the sake of discussion allow me to say it. "Only his mother could love this boy," because one of the major characteristics of the Parable of the Prodigal Son is that there are no women in it. And I know in my heart, as surely as I know anything, and always have, that there is a mother in this story, and that she plays a very major role.

Why isn't she in there, in Luke 15? Well, for one thing, it was a story told to a group of men in a culture in which only men had time to stand around talking about religion. They, the scribes and pharisees, who had complained to Jesus about his associating with sinners — they were fathers, brothers, males, all of them. The story was for them, a story about an amazing father who, unlike them, loves with an all-embracing, all-encompassing, all-inclusive grace. The one telling the story broke both with custom and religious law in his own relationships with women, his easy friendship with women, his inclusion of women in the disciple band, his life-long continuing association with his own mother, and his resurrection appearances — to the women.

So I'm going to be presumptuous about the Biblical material and say that there is a mother in this story. And part of my reasoning is that this son's behavior is so arrogant, so appalling, so offensive to a man's sense of honor and respect that it would take more love than anybody I know is able to generate, alone to embrace him, or, as my mother-in-law would have said, "Only his mother could love that boy!"

The son has said to his father the cruelest words a child can say to a parent: "I can't wait for you to die. Since you show no signs of dying, I want my share of your assets now so I can at least enjoy myself." And then he takes the assets and goes as far away from his parents and family and community as he can travel.

Kenneth Bailey is a wonderful New Testament scholar who has the additional advantage of having lived his entire adult life in the Middle East. Bailey helps us understand how very public this whole drama would have been. Bailey adds the social dimension which is missing in the story itself. There is a larger community in this story, perhaps a village next to the family estate. There are neighbors and guests there for the celebration when the son returns, so the son's leaving was a very public event; everyone knew about it; it was hot gossip over the

back fences and on the street. "Did you hear what happened? It's such a shame; his parents must be crushed." The father's humiliation is complete and devastatingly public, in a culture where children take care of aging parents; a culture in which not offending another person publicly is a matter of high social propriety, let alone your own father . . . your family.

There was a short story in the "For Men Only" section of the Sunday *New York Times* a few weeks ago about a middle-aged Jewish man whose father had disowned him when he simply married outside his father's Orthodox faith and because his offense was against the whole family; his mother complied with her husband's indignity and proud decision. He hadn't seen either of them in years and now she had died.

So my assumption is that if there is no mother in this story, that father not only doesn't come running down the road to welcome the son home — he turns his face to the wall, never utters his son's name again, lives out his life in bitter resentment. Or if he does confront his son, it is in stern, wounded pride, waiting for full confession and full restitution.

Art understands this dimension of the story. In Debussy's gorgeous setting of the Prodigal Son which our morning choir soloists presented last Sunday evening, the major role is the mother's. She feels the separation from the son most deeply. She grieves his absence most poignantly. It is her love which still warms his heart, which slowly turns him around and draws him home. And she intercedes with his father, begging him to forgive and receive his son.

One of the resources I have been using in this series of sermons is Henri Nouwen's new book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Nouwen is a Dutch priest who reflects on Rembrandt's great masterpiece, the Return of the Prodigal, a poster of which is in the exhibit in Flynn Hall, and several reproductions of which are on the bulletin boards throughout the building. You must take a careful look at the picture today — it contains an amazing theological assertion. Look carefully at the father's hands. They are resting on his kneeling son's back. The son has returned, thrown himself at his aged father's feet. His father leans over; his red robe seems to embrace the son; his hands rest gently on his back.

Nouwen writes:

> "Gradually over the years I have come to know those hands. They held me from the hour of my conception, they welcomed me at birth, held me close to my mother's breast, fed me, kept me warm. They have protected me in times of trouble and consoled me in times of grief. These hands are God's hands." [p. 90]

And then Nouwen calls attention to an amazing detail: the two hands are quite different.

> "The father's left hand touching the son's shoulder is strong and muscular. I can see a certain pressure. The hand is gentle, but firm.
>
> "The other hand does not hold. It is refined, soft, and very tender and elegant. It lies gently on the son's shoulder. It is a mother's hand." [p. 94]

Nouwen concludes that Rembrandt, in his old age, had an amazing insight.

> "The central figure in this story is not simply a great patriarch. Rather he is mother as well as father and touches the son with a feminine as well as a masculine hand. It is God — in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood reside." [p. 94]

So there emerges in this brilliant and beloved story a radically new notion of God whose love is strong and protective and also infinitely patient and graceful: love which is challenging and demanding but also patient and inclusive. A God who says "try to climb to the top," but also "be careful, watch your step. . . don't hurt yourself."

What emerges in this story — but also in the life of Jesus Christ — is a new idea of a God who does not wait in judgment for people to behave themselves and humbly return to the fold, but a God whose love reaches out and pursues men and women wherever they go: a God whose love is a presence and a force in the hearts of men and women even as they are trying to put distance between God and themselves.

> "It is the great mystery of faith," Nouwen writes, "that we do not choose God. God chooses us. For most of my life," he goes on, "I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me and to love me."

It is the great mystery of faith which we can confess but not fully explain, a reality of life to which we can occasionally point but never understand. God's love is in our hearts no matter how far we have traveled. God is looking for, finding ways to love and nurture us when we are unaware and even when we are attempting to flee from God into some distant country.

> "Where can I go from your spirit?" the Psalmist asked.
> "Or where can I flee from your presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
> If I make my bed in hell, you are there,
> If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
> Even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand hold me fast."

A little less poetically, a John Updike character says,

> "'I do feel, I guess, that somewhere behind all that' — he gestures outward at the scenery: they are passing the housing developments this side of the golf course; half wood, half brick, one-and-a-half stories in little flat bulldozed yards with tricycles and spindly three-year-old trees, the ungrandest landscape in the world — 'I do feel, I guess, that behind this, there's something that wants me to find it.'" [*Rabbit, Run*]

And of course St. Augustine,

> "Thou hast made us restless, until we find our rest in thee."

When the young son comes to himself, he remembers his father's and his mother's love. Couldn't we say that it is the memory of that love — undeterred by his rejection of it, it is the reality of that love that effects his conversion, his turning around, his homecoming?

And just as his departure has been embarrassingly public, so his return is joyfully open. When he left, he had rejected the community. When he returned his reconciliation was with his parents and with the community. The community gathers to celebrate his homecoming.

There's something of the whole human story in that. There's something of each of us in that story.

Some of us left the security of God's love a long time ago and have been wandering around in a distant country ever since. Some of us left our religion, our church, faith, as archaic, obsolete, superstitions, which have nothing to do with what we thought was the real world: the rational world of science, the world of experience, stimulation, gratification, accumulation.

And some of us, in this Culture of Disbelief, because of intellectual doubt and like the composer, Gian Carlo Menotti, have no beliefs we can call our own, but miss believing very much.

And some of us never left physically, but in one way or another have strayed, like that lost sheep in another of Jesus' stories or that older brother, still at home but alienated by his own self-righteousness and resentment.

Some of us have forgotten who we are, forgotten that we are children of God, with original glory in us. Some of us have forgotten that we have dominion, power, responsibility . . . for the life of the world and our own lives.

And some of us have left home literally . . . left loving, supportive relationships because they were inconvenient, cumbersome. Some of us feel quite alone.

And all of us, I think, occasionally, look toward home wistfully, longingly and it is then, I think, that God's love, God's own inclusive, pursuing love is working in our hearts.

It is World Communion Sunday, a celebration of reunion: a high and holy expression of the dearest hope — the human family reunited.

As you receive the elements of communion this morning, may that humble gesture of receiving and giving bread and wine be a symbol of that precious hope. And for you personally, may it be a step, perhaps the first step, toward one who loves you without reservation and in whose love you are home.

Amen.

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Thank you, dear God, for your love which follows us, working in our hearts, reaching out to us through the love of dear friends, holding us in the love of parents and family and spouses, community.

Thank you for loving us when we couldn't love ourselves, and for reminding us of who we are: in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.